Social Theatre and Acting in “The Paradox” of Diderot

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In the great theatre, the theatre of the world, to which I always return, all passionate souls are on the stage· all men of genius are in the audience.

Denis Diderot

The problematic of social theatre runs throughout the philosophical dialogue *The paradox of the actor* by Denis Diderot and is organically connected to the core of his theory of acting. The comparison between the theatrical and the social stage, beyond functioning as an analogical schema, reveals an essential and enduring encounter —both frontal and interpenetrative— between two distinct forms of “theatre” that illuminate and feed into one another.

Diderot rejects from the outset, with absolute certainty, the idea that human sensibility can serve as the foundation of the art of acting. Sensibility, which he attributes to physical and psychological causes (mobility of the diaphragm, sensitivity of the nerves, vivid imagination), belongs to the sphere of everyday life rather than to that of art. There, “in the slightest circumstance, the sensitive person loses control. He will become neither a great king, nor a great minister, nor a great captain, nor a great lawyer, nor a great doctor,” because “sensibility is always accompanied by a lack of organization.” The theatrical stage, however, constitutes a different world, governed by its own laws, where the immediate, unmediated expression of life cannot stand as such. The actor must cultivate and train himself in order to transcend his natural disposition and consciously and harmoniously integrate into this mimetic system of forms. Sensibility on stage, whether extreme or moderate, renders the actor mediocre or poor. “The complete lack of sensibility prepares great actors.”

From this very point onward, the tension between the two stages —the social and the theatrical (artistic)— begins to emerge. Diderot frequently turns his gaze toward society and recognizes there a form of "theatre" in which acting is not an art but a *symptom*. He constantly returns to it, employing terms such as "the great theatre" and "the theatre of the world" in order to contrast two orders. On the stage of the world stand those who, in the theatre, sit in the audience —the "madmen"— while in the audience of the world are those who ascend the stage of the theatre —the "wise." The actor is the wise observer, "who grasps the ridiculousness of so many different figures, represents it, and makes us laugh both at those troublesome eccentrics of whom we have been victims, and at ourselves." From this point on, the theatre of the world —this vast madhouse, in other words social theatre— becomes the object of systematic investigation. Its study is a fundamental prerequisite for the actor to construct the ideal model of his role and to imitate it perfectly.

When Diderot notes that "he who in society strives and has the gift to please everyone… is a professional flatterer, a great sycophant, a great actor," he reveals the existence of a *quotidian actor* —an individual who performs roles in order to survive or to assert himself socially. "Look around you and you will see that those who are constantly cheerful have neither great vices nor great virtues, and that, in general, those who are agreeable by profession are superficial people, without any stable principle." His interlocutor intensifies this image by likening the *everyday actor* of social theatre to a marionette that transforms "according to the movement of the string held in the hand of its master." A marionette is also —indeed, an "exquisite" one— the great actor of the theatre, "whose string is held by the poet, who shows him in every line the true form he must take." Yet Diderot hastens to draw a radical distinction between this form of hypocrisy and artistic acting. He loves and honors the profession of the actor; nevertheless, he juxtaposes and compares the "actor" of the social stage with the artist-actor —the madman with the wise man— in order to derive his conclusions. His ironic reference to those "agreeable by profession," who lack a stable character and thus can "play all roles," reinforces his critique of a society in which dissimulation has become a *modus vivendi*. His interlocutor later confirms: "…the plays, both old and new, that your virtuous actors would exclude from their repertoire, are precisely those we perform in social gatherings." And Diderot adds: "…our fellow citizens descend to the level of the most trivial players."

This social dimension acquires particular weight when Diderot observes, in an absolute tone, that "the theatre is a refuge, never a choice," and that many actors, in their social lives, appear insensitive, superficial, morally deficient. "I have often seen an actor laugh off stage; I do not recall ever having seen one weep. What do they do, then, with that sensibility they appropriate and that we attribute to them? Do they leave it on the stage when they descend, to take it up again when they return?" "You see them great on stage because, you say, they have soul. I see them small and base in society because they have none at all." And how could they, when they function like

marionettes? Yet this observation (like the other negative ones that follow) does not lead him to a simple condemnation of the profession but to a broader social critique: the problem concerns not only actors but a generalized corruption of morals. When he wonders what the effect of the spectacle would be if actors were "good people and their profession respectable," he acknowledges that the aesthetic and ethical dimension of theatre depends directly on the social status of the actor. In support of this social observation, his interlocutor has already aptly pointed out the actor's "bad inheritance."

The concept of social theatre reaches its peak in the description of the spectator's experience. In the hall of the Comédie-Française, the citizen leaves —according to Diderot— his vices at the entrance and takes them back upon exit. Inside the theatre, he appears just, a friend of virtue, and is indignant at actions that in real life he would himself commit under similar circumstances. Here the theatrical and the social stage do not merely coexist: they confront one another head-on. Artistic theatre exposes the hypocrisy of social behavior, while at the same time the social stage invades the auditorium and transforms the spectator into an actor. This double function renders theatre a space of conflict and interaction. It is not performed only on stage but also in the audience. The spectator is not a passive recipient but participates in a second theatre, in which he performs virtue without possessing it. Thus, the theatrical space becomes the site where social theatre manifests itself, without necessarily being transformed —and often with greater significance than what unfolds on stage.

But the philosopher of the *Paradox* goes even further, transferring this encounter from the audience into the very interior of the stage. He achieves this by analyzing the inherent duality of the actor's stage existence through situations of double nature that interweave. Actors, simultaneously themselves and the dramatic characters they portray, speak on two levels at once: as social persons and as fictional figures. Thus, the lovers in the play are at the same time lovers as real individuals who, while performing the fictional scene, arrange their next real meeting. As they alternate between their roles and their personal identity, they move in and out of the mimetic convention, constructing a dual theatre in which the theatrical and the social stage merge. Through this method, Diderot does not merely expose social theatricality in the audience but incorporates it into the stage action, establishing a form of double theatricality.

Within the same framework, the protagonist of the *Paradox* observes that our prolonged familiarity with (artistic) theatre (he uses the first-person plural, making no exceptions) leads us to "retain in our interactions a theatrical emphasis and to parade" in society characters and souls that we do not possess, thus producing the ridiculous. This is the very ridiculousness he had identified from the outset in the great theatre of the world. This observation brings him very close to the moral critique of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who held that theatre teaches dissimulation. Unlike Rousseau, however, Diderot does not go so far as to reject theatre. On the contrary, he attempts to reform it, proposing the moral and social elevation of the actor, the recognition of his art, and

the improvement of dramaturgy. His theoretical proposal is further enriched by his analysis of acting through the example of Clairon (an actress of the Comédie-Française), in order to distinguish between genuine and feigned sensibility. Diderot's great actor does not rely on personal feeling but on the precise and detailed imitation of the external signs of emotion. In this way, he can grasp the ideal model of the character — the phantom of the role— and bring it to life. Artistic success depends not on truly feeling but on the consistent and unified rendering of this model of artistic imitation.

It is by no means accidental that the dialogue —essentially a work of parallel monologues, since the philosopher's theoretical rigor leaves no room for convergence— concludes with a final, revealing image of social theatre. The everyday human being-actor appears as a double creator, since he invents discourse and at the same time performs it. Social existence is an endless act of acting. Thus, the distinction between the two stages does not lead to absolute separation but to a profound interpenetration.

Ultimately, Diderot does not merely juxtapose the theatre of the stage and the theatre of society; he reveals their enduring dialectic. Each functions as the mirror of the other, and at the point of their encounter emerges the crisis of the human condition. Acting, as an art, is founded upon distance, control, and form. Acting, as a social phenomenon, represents instability, dissimulation, affectation, and moral corruption. Through this tension, the *Paradox* emerges not only as a theory of acting but also as a penetrating critique of society itself.